

# SCHOOL DRAMA CLUB – UNCONVENTIONAL INSTRUMENT IN EDUCATION OF PRIMARY OR GYMNASIAL PUPILS

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**Abstract:** *Romanian modern theatre is definitely known to be the appanage of adults, with regard to play and audience, without implying even for a moment that, fundamentally, the theatre was a school manifestation supported by the Church. This paper attempts to give back to the school and pupils this great educational potential, represented by school drama club, encountered mainly in primary and gymnasial education, in the form of short sketches performed on occasional festivities.*

**Keywords:** *theatre, school, church, pupil, education.*

## Introduction

„From times immemorial and until today, role of theatre in education of a nation was and is important. As practical school for teaching principles of morality, revival of good taste, formation of social life, development and articulation of national feeling, shaping of characters, perfecting of the language and for everything concerns the cultural progress of a nation, theatre stands by the church and the school, lending them support and many times, even surpassing them.”

These are the words of Iosif Vulcan<sup>1</sup>, president of The Financial Society for the Romanian Theatre<sup>2</sup>, who otherwise presents

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<sup>1</sup>Iosif Vulcan, (31 March 1841 - 8 September 1907): Romanian publicist and writer, cultural animator, member of Romanian Academy, founder of Familia (Family) magazine. He is considered the *literary godfather* of the poet Mihai Eminescu, being the one who published for this the poem *De-aş avea ...*, changing his name from Eminovici to Eminescu.

<sup>2</sup> The meeting of setting up the society takes place in Satu-Mare, on 1st-2nd May 1872. The declared main purpose was gathering an amount of money

within the General Assembly of the Society from Saxon Sebeș, role and importance of developing Romanian theatre in Transylvania, as direction of cultural progress, accepted and supported by the Church.

One cannot but remark the tight connection between theatrical activities and those of national character. Until 1918, almost each stage plays in Transylvania also included national component, irrespective of its articulation manner. We may even refer to existence of two dimensions of Romanian Transylvanian theatre, one cultural, concerning stage plays, debut of some young authors of theatre plays or emerging actors, and the other component, national, that referred to including of Romanian elements – Romanian songs, Romanian poems, Romanian folk costume – into plays<sup>3</sup>.

Gradually, following the normal development of time, supported by the great number of historical events, the theatre occupied the place known today in the culture and education of Romanian nation, asserting as a means of communion, of common share of authentic values. If, until 1989, there was underlying criticism centred on forcefully imposed theatrical subscription, thus filling auditoria with pupils, nowadays, criticism is reversed, lamenting the absence of students from auditoria. It is the paradox of a free society, competitive, in which man can choose, the child is offered numerous temptations much more alluring than the theatre and in which the parent, more than once, does not intervene, being himself the victim of this paradox.

Because of this reason, I personally believe that teachers are obliged to attempt approaching theatre in school, in class, having

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necessary for building a Romanian theatre in Transylvania, in Brașov. Reality demonstrated that throughout time, the society consumed a great part of this fund with wages of own employees. It is true that also existed stipendiaries of this fund, that a theatrical library has been set up, yet annual reports of the society indicate a general dissatisfaction about the activity of the society and its management.

<sup>3</sup> Sorin Valer Russu, *Biserică, istorie și cultură în ziarul Unirea de la Blaj, de la apariție la Marea Unire (1891-1918)*(Church, history and culture illustrated in Unirea newspaper from Blaj, from the first issue to the Great Union (1891-1918), Cluj-Napoca, Mega Publishing House, 2014, pp.192-206.

both the younger and the pupils in the upper years as stars on the scene. Following 20 years of pastoral expertise and not only, I am convinced that also priests, together with teachers of religion and other laypersons from parochial communities, can, even are morally obliged to contribute to sound education of the youth also through school drama club and amateur theatre, regarded as unconventional instrument of education. Advantages of such an approach, regarded as a whole, are huge, at both psychological level and training. The phrase “making something both entertaining and useful” becomes a reference point in this case, offering a new perspective on education.

## 1. Overview

The first information concerning existence of a theatrical movement in Transylvania dates to 1754 and is recorded in the letter of the director of the schools from Blaj, Atanasie Rednic<sup>4</sup>, sent to bishop Petru Pavel Aron. By this, he praised initiative of some primary or gymnasial pupils, under the guidance of Grigore Maior<sup>5</sup>, to set up during winter holiday a troupe that would put on a brief performance<sup>6</sup> in each Romanian locality. Among localities where such performances were definitely given are Sebeş, Alba Iulia, Vinţ. Similarly, the teatrology expert Ion Cazaban reveals in his work *Teatrul românesc. Repere istorice*<sup>7</sup> (*Romanian theatre. Historical benchmarks*) also name of Vasile Neagoe Orbul who assured staging of performances. The fact that between 1777 and 1780 pupils from boarding house of Gymnasium from Blaj put on the play *Occisio Gregorii in Moldavia tragedice expressa* attributed to Iosif Vulcan is additionally mentioned in this work<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> Greek-Catholic bishop of Alba Iulia and Făgăraş Bishopric, during 13 October 1765 – 2 May 1772.

<sup>5</sup> Greek-Catholic bishop of Alba Iulia and Făgăraş Bishopric, during 1773-1782.

<sup>6</sup> Ştefan Manciu, *Aici e pământul sfânt al Blajului (This is the holy land of Blaj)*, edition and foreword by Ioan Mitrofan and Ion Buzaşi, Blaj, 2003, p.201.

<sup>7</sup> See <http://cimec.ro/teatre/cazaban.html>.

<sup>8</sup> Ion Cazaban, *op.cit.*, p. 1.

Thus, pupils were the first actors, in the true sense of the word, even if rehearsal was empirical, the approached themes being Birth of God and local traditions.

Stance of the Church, towards this cultural trend, is encountered officially only in 1872, when the First Provincial Synod encompassed within its canons also regulations concerning the theatre. Thus, ch. VI – *On private entertainment of the clergy*, title VII, records that:

„Yet, the Synod will not allow its priests to read from forbidden or immoral books, to drop into bars, except when travelling, nor getting drunk, so that the priests to hunt, to play cards with ardour and impulse for gaining, or deal with professional gamblers. Similarly, the Synod does not approve frequenting of profane theatres, participating in games from festivities and balls, as well as walking at nights to avoid any suspicions.”<sup>9</sup>

We can notice that the “first encounter” of the Church with the theatre was not quite favourable, its subsequent acknowledgement being only a means of cultural emancipation of Transylvanian Romanians. Following the Union from 1918, the Romanian theatrical movement undergoes rapid development, Romania of those times laying also the theatre among the benchmarks of culture.

100 years ago, Iosif Vulcan said: „The language is the life of a nation, literature is its food for thought, and the theatre is the organ by which such a food is offered. Theatre contributes to existence and prosperity of the state. Culture develops love for the nation and country; consequently Romanian theatre is at the same time a national and patriotic institution”.

If nowadays somebody would dare to speak such ideas, he would likely be accused of populism and demagoguery, being considered immature or nationalist. Unfortunately, the current state of affairs of the nation imposes valid measures to be taken on the whole. If this thing is not possible to occur at macrostructural level, than at least we should take action, at the level of the community,

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<sup>9</sup> Ștefan Manciulea, *op.cit.*, p. 145.

Church, school, class and pupils, where reception of the beautiful is not yet altered or totally compromised.

Deliberately, we chose „the beautiful”, because the same Iosif Vulcan also said: „Theatre is also a school. A school in which truth embraces the clothes of the beauty, which ennobles, reforms and distracts”. Currently we should be committed to this ideal, not being afraid to be sized up.

## 2. Plea

I believe that from here must also be started the analysis of the manner in which the big theatre and its subdivision, school drama club, becomes an unconventional instrument of pupil's education.

From birth, the newborn is accompanied by the soft and touching words of the mother, the harmonious songs for children, rhythmicity of words from stories, physical comfort offered by the presence of mum. These are the first factors that „kindle the spark”, the child becoming receptive to them, succeeding even to associate them with the well-being. Growing up in such an environment, the child, reaching the age of primary education, is already familiar with play, music, poems, the educator being in charge with „transforming the little spark into a fire”. Otherwise, these are also the first necessary and sufficient elements so that the small pre-school pupil to become the small performing artist.

Involvement of the priest in the educational development and track of the child is apparently minor. I say apparently, because reality indicates necessity of priest's presence, which derives from need of God. The active priest<sup>10</sup> is present among families from his parochial community, from birth to death. By the priest's ritual prayer for the mother and baptism of the newborn is cemented the intimate bond between the spiritual shepherd, the priest and the family. From this moment on, family must be encouraged and guided

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<sup>10</sup> I refer here to priests that have multiple pastoral activities and do not only limit to Sunday or occasional service.

to go to church, as well as the children should be familiarized with the sacred ones. Gradually, the child accommodates with environment of services, of spiritual quality, with the inside coloured by Byzantine painting or Latin sobriety, with the sound of bells or small bells, with the scent of myrrh and incense. He must be included among the other children of similar age, from the parish, in different programmes. Slowly, but indubitable, the child becomes aware of his affiliation to a place, his own place in close hierarchy<sup>11</sup>. The child feels like home. He becomes dough in the hands of God, shaped through the priest, nursery teacher, primary teacher, and teachers. Thus, it is set up the triad upon which I personally insisted many times, as being the most illustrative and effective model in education<sup>12</sup> of the child: Church – Family - School.

With the first kindergarten festivities, the pre-school pupil familiarizes with the „scene”, with that place where the child shines, to parents and grandparents' satisfaction and similarly to the nursery teacher. Within these festivities, they receive minor roles, lines or songs, being also accompanied by the first movements on stage. These movements, either natural or clumsy, may anticipate subsequent skill of the pupil, to perform a role, to play. The child perceiving of the game becomes essential. If the role, the line, the song received are perceived as a task, there is the chance that these to be fulfilled with difficulty, as a duty, without attractiveness, forgetting about the *processed material* intervening briefly. Disinterest is obvious. Yet, if the child perceives his action as a game, he becomes flexible in the process of assimilation, his ability of acquiring, absorbing increases, as well as his resilience to intellectual endeavour, fatigue setting in much later.

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<sup>11</sup> I refer here to positioning of the child in relation to the other children from the group, place of each of them being determined by different criteria: force, cleverness, verbal fondness, shyness, impudence, social rank.

<sup>12</sup> See also Alin Gherghinoiu, *Educația copilului în Biserică, Familie și Școală (Education of child in Church, Family and School)*, in the magazine *Școala din Familie*, issue 9, [www.arhivam.ro](http://www.arhivam.ro).

With professionalism and pedagogic tact, the educator may point out, explaining to the child, each training factor of artistic feature:

-by song, the role and beauty of the melody, developing musical hearing, stimulating rhythmic feeling, the habit of memorizing lines and, why not, shaping the incipient inner self star;

-by poetry, importance of the line, manners of interpretation, tone, voice, vocal balance, inflections that determine states and emotions, stage fright and methods of coping with it;

-by role games, the meaning and ease of expression or communication with other children, on a certain topic, development of the vocabulary and correct usage of new words.

All these data, interdisciplinarily connected, may give people direction of a „sound” education, beneficial to harmonious development of the child. At pre-elementary level, the priest may take over and use a part of these training factors in the catechetical process, even if not at the level of the expert, and apply them within some brief sketches performed to exemplify certain fragments of the Old and New Testament.

For example, the biblical fragment from the chapter 37, verses 1-36: Joseph sold by his brothers<sup>13</sup>. We deliberately made this choice. It assumes involvement within the sketch of a great number of children, illustrating the 12 brothers, the two parents, as well as the merchants. Each child acquires a name. Their first task is to remember that name. Eventually the child may be associated with a name of the sketch, in the case in which his own name is identical or similar. At this stage can be performed the two dreams that Joseph had. The priest reads the first dream and then explains the moment of the sketch. The child chosen for the role of Joseph is placed at the middle, and the other 11 children, depicting the sheaves from the dream, are placed around him. At the proper moment of the reading, the children bow to Joseph. Be aware! The chosen child to play the

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<sup>13</sup> *Biblia sau Sfânta Scriptură (The Bible or the Holy Writ)*, București, Editura Institutului Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, 1982, p. 51.

role of Joseph must be the head of the children's group. Thus, it is underlined the relation leader-member of the group, the children being able to perceive relation first-second, exactly. Similarly, the priest also reads the second dream and then the moment of the sketch is explained. The names given to the children in the first act will be mandatorily preserved also for the second act. Furthermore, two new characters appear the sun and the moon, meaning father and mother of Joseph. The bowing movement is repeated. Alongside of these two sketches, the priest may pass on moral teachings, which the child easily apprehends, by questions concerning good and evil, industry and laziness, grief and joy, pride and modesty. They will be perceived by the children as games, given that they are already familiarized with placement in a circle, bending of the body, with different gestures encountered in games within or outside school.

Reaching the primary school, the pupil is familiarized with these aspects, especially then when the teacher proposes him to resume them at another level. Two different situations may arise: the first, in which the pupil rejects, in a first phase, resuming the notions, considering to be known and, consequently, the whole process is boring. The second, in which the pupil happily accepts the approach, anticipating the "new" that follows to be communicated to him.

The elementary teacher, for the School or the priest, for the Church by their skills and professional expertise may handle both situations, thus directing pupil's attention to their intention.

For the primary education, the elementary teacher benefits of the already existent base of the child, as concerns the practice of sketches in kindergarten. The new dimension, to which the elementary teacher reports the undertaking of school drama club, involves an active attitude of the small actors derived from superior awareness of the proper act. To this may largely contribute also presentation of some professional actors, invited at different activities in class or school. Progress of sketches' quality is directly proportional with progress of pupils in class, in the general context of studied subjects. The parallel increasing development of the two above elements indicates a state of normality of the instructive-



educational process, while, a distress of this tandem, indicates a breakdown of teaching-learning relation.

Education of pupil through school drama club in primary school is found in a series of aspects at behavioural level, emotional level, as well as cognitive one. It enriches vocabulary with new expressions, new words, movements that indicate certain states, learning face pantomime to mirror at the surface inner states, emotion, more or less profound, using different vocal tones or intensity for personal situations and states, these being only several of the benefits. Positive transposition into every day real life, of the new learnt elements certainly contributes to balanced shaping of the child, achieving progresses during youth and then as an adult.

In his turn, the priest accompanies the child throughout the evolutive path previously mentioned, making his own contribution by increasing the informative area<sup>14</sup>. Resuming the example of the sketch of Joseph's selling by his brothers, the priest reads for children the whole chapter, explaining subsuming of the evangelic fragment under the sketch. Furthermore, he may give details about the old traditions and customs of the Jewish people, which are also preserved today or what teachings of Torah are at the base of some of these. Additionally, may be introduced notions of morals about the attitude of Joseph's brothers, of his parents, Egyptian authorities in relation to Joseph. Permanently, the priest will also underline God's role and involvement in the life of Joseph, as a valid example of the presence of God in the life of the child. The sketch does not only come down to simple amateurish theatrical act, but becomes a platform of religious education, in which the palpable represented by the role, small actors, determines conscious learning of new teachings, eliminating a good part of the automatism owed to possible disinterest manifested by the pupil.

The sketch becomes interesting for pupils by the texts they receive for each role, by eventual involvement of a specialized

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<sup>14</sup> I refer here to development of certain topics that were tackled previously, presentation on a higher level of understanding of certain aspects of ecclesiastical teaching.

faculty, to imprint to the sketch the cursive and explicit character of a theatre play, by explaining pantomime, gestures and necessary movements for its success. Each new responsibility delegated to the pupil will strengthen self-assurance and will stimulate him in other school activities.

Each school year of primary school represents for pupil steps in one's education, in his training. It is a period of intense acquiring, in which the pupil is meeting again with theatre, this time with big theatre. The pupil meets authentic actors, transposing by his imagination, the imaginary characters of heard stories in the person of actors on the big stage.

Now, is also when the pupil makes a wish of impersonating one character or another within some roles. Both the following and decisive step belongs to the teacher, the one that has to identify the play quickly, in compliance with a series of norms specific to the age and, particularly, correspondence role-pupil.

To rediscover oneself in a beloved character, to play that role in front of the class or school, may sometimes influence the pupil so much, that certain positive features of the respective character to become own features or principles to be followed as an adult.

Due to this reason, just as the potter moulds the clay, the teacher has also – I would dare say – the obligation, to include on the educational curricula, school drama club as well.

During gymnasium and then, particularly secondary-school, initiative of theatrical sketches changes, the pupils encouraging it, they being extremely receptive to such undertakings. Puberty, new transformations at physical and psychical level, quietly invite to manifestations of own personality, many times expressed by roles of these plays. Pupils are, in this case, the ones who choose their role, considering it illustrative of their own person, this way attempting to determine the real image perceived by the others in relation to them. School, by contribution of school education, perfects now the young generation, generation that lies at the base of each sound society. The Church is training within the young generation the future practicing Christians, believers faithful to their own creed. In fact, many of the

young at the age of consent have already adopted the stance of practicing Christian, or not, religious or indifferent, without taking into consideration the gender of the person. Largely, the Church is reaping now the fruits of the Religion classes from several years ago, parochial catechesis and, why not, short sketches. What caused surprise was a set of questions addressed to the young graduates, concerning the moments they consider useful and interesting in the religious educational process. It indicated in significant proportion music, debates tackling interesting themes for pupils, sometimes with religious connotations, and theatrical sketches also including here the processions organized by the Church in certain parochial communities, on Easter, as a depiction of passions of our Lord Jesus Christ to Golgotha.

The last 25 years offered the possibility of approaching different work instruments in attracting children and the young towards the religious. Among these, school drama club proved to be many times an effective instrument, little costing, available, loved by students, with exceptional results in shaping their future personality. Although school drama club is not yet studied in school only at the level of school circles, not even optionals, it is used by the faculty, elementary teachers and teachers alike, being acknowledged as unconventional instrument of school education.

## **Epilogue**

For some pupils, the attitude manifested towards this new experience, of theatre in itself, is one that indicates indifference, while for others, it is true, fewer in number, means joy of discovering an area of expression, to which they can also contribute with their interpretation. Of these, sometimes of hundreds or thousands of pupils, the “rising star” will appear and, once appeared he/she would shine more and more during gymnasium years, then secondary school, on the stage of an arts and theatre institute and, finally, on the great stage of the Romanian theatre. Yet, this destiny is reserved, as we have previously mentioned, only to „stars” and falls within the category of exceptions that prove the rule. The teachers will

pridefully remember over the years, seeing them on big scenes, that their hands also moulded „the clay”.

The memory of beautiful classes in which they learnt will dwell upon the majority of pupils after they experienced school drama club. They learnt to love the beautiful and relate to it, they learnt to be generous and open, communicative and bold, learnt to open their eyes and become for a moment everything they proposed.

This is school drama club, the „apprentice” of big theatre, which teaches each of us to play our own role on the great scene of everyday life.

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